

“The Church of Christ on Earth is ... a place of great Trafique and Marchandize: all the Citizens whereof having received, from the Lord, their number of talents, are become Merchants, or traders, in one kinde or other...”

William Pemberton, *The Godly Merchant* (1613)

My research will explore the interface between mercantile and religious discourses on the late Elizabethan and Jacobean stage (c.1590–1625). Merchants feature in much of the period’s dramatic output: within a context of emerging capitalism and the geographical extension of England’s overseas commerce, dramatists repeatedly place the ethical and spiritual status of merchants under scrutiny. Yet, as Pemberton’s sermon illustrates, the merchant also served as a powerful Christian metaphor in early modern culture. Focusing on a genre profoundly implicated in the commercial developments of the period, I will investigate the ways in which playwrights such as Dekker, Jonson and Shakespeare dramatise this highly charged figure. Freighted with such complex and wide-ranging associations, the merchant becomes a site upon which evolving tensions between capitalist and Christian ideas can be explored, resolved and played out.

Previous scholars have identified varied attitudes towards merchants and mercantile activity in early modern literature (e.g. John McVeagh, *Tradefull Merchants*, 1981; Laura Caroline Stevenson, *Praise and Paradox*, 1984). However, the importance of the spiritual resonance of mercantilism in informing dramatic representations has been under-examined. In *Troilus and Cressida* (c.1602), Shakespeare’s oblique allusions to the Pearl of Great Price (Matthew 13:45-46) suggest the distortion of biblical teachings resulting from unfettered mercantilism; by contrast, in Heywood’s *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody*, Part 2 (c.1605), the image of the merchant’s pearl that “can scarce be valued” resurfaces as a symbol of Christian good works. Viewed in the context of England’s religious and commercial rivalries with neighbouring Catholic states, my approach moves beyond character study to address issues of national and civic identity. While upwardly mobile merchants such as Heywood’s Thomas Gresham and Dekker’s Simon Eyre (*The Shoemakers’ Holiday*, 1599) embody national prosperity and pride, ‘city comedies’ offer countervailing critiques of contemporary mercantile life. Moreover, my research will explore connections between conventional soteriological metaphors of deliverance (as witnessed in Volpone’s declaration that “I am sailing to my port ... And I am so glad I am so near my haven”

[1.3.30]) and the frequent references to the overseas transportation of commercial goods in drama of the period. These imbricated narratives of delivery and deliverance will engage with questions of the relationship between worldly and spiritual goods, the material culture of conveyance, and early modern conceptions of transit and transition.

Having undertaken Part II papers in Early Tudor Literature, and Literary Theory and Criticism (with a particular emphasis upon sixteenth-century literary theories), I am excited to deepen my understanding of early modern drama through a figure of continuing cultural relevance. Both spiritual and economic communities underwent important transformations in the early modern period: as Pemberton's metaphor suggests, the mutually influential discourses underpinning these changes intersected at the site of the merchant, making this a fertile area for new research into identity and social relations in early modern England.